

Fringe Foods: Soft-shell crab from Gotham New York Bagels

Getting comfortable with the menu of a really big country

By Kyle Nabilcy

We don't get a whole lot of credit here in the Midwest. We get nicknames like "Fly-over Country." Chicago actually takes pride in being the "Second City." "America's Breadbasket" is about as far as we get from faint praise, and it doesn't exactly conjure up the image of a place anyone from the coasts would want to visit.

It comes as little surprise, then, to learn that the world at large, nevermind the coasts, considers Middle America to be the very embodiment of cultural illiteracy. We are the unpolished rubes. The New World Luddites. And our palates are just as unrefined as our stirruped stretch pants and bulky team-logo sweatshirts.

Take Mr. Taras Grescoe, author of *The Devil's Picnic: Travels Through the Underworld of Food and Drink*. When not living the sumptuously laissez-faire life in his home city of Montreal, he occasionally wanders the globe in search of the kind of culinary decadences that apparently make life meaningful. For his above-mentioned book, Grescoe sampled Spanish bull's testicles (well, pig's testicles, actually, but that's a long story), raw-milk Époisses cheese, and illicit Cuban cigars in San Francisco. Grescoe misses no opportunity to indict the United States of leading the slouch towards global uniformity in cuisine. In one passage, he accuses New World consumers of preferring "their cheese bacon-flavored and in spray cans." At least he doesn't spare the rest of the continent the sharpness of that barb.

What Grescoe, among many others, fails to accept or understand is the sheer size of the American buffet. Not the Ponderosa, all-you-can-eat kind; the national kind that features a vast multitude of cuisine from left coast to right, northern border to southern. That immensity, combined with the relative age of the US versus Old World European nations, results in an insular regionality of menu from sea to shining sea. It is that regional pride that not only tends to rebuff foreign delicacies, but shields Detroit from Cincinnati's goetta and keeps Rocky Mountain oysters from rolling downhill to San Diego.

I came across a prime example of this regionality completely unawares, when I wandered into Gotham New York Bagels and Eats on Mifflin recently. I was looking for lunch, and looked up to see a menu item that had been absent for months. Gotham's menu has undergone something of a remodeling since it debuted about a year ago. Some of the sandwiches are no longer; the Montauk (fried clam) and Amagansett (soft-shell crab) were among the casualties. I learned that they didn't sell very well, and the ingredients were too much trouble to stock. Maybe a crab-cake sandwich, some time in the future.

So, when I saw "Soft-Shell Crab" on the new chalkboard menu behind the counter, the foodie in me leapt for joy. It was another chance! A new beginning! A second bite at the... whole-fried crab on a bagel. Did I really want to try this? In Wisconsin?

Heck yes. It's globalization, baby. So what's the problem with a very time-sensitive Chesapeake Bay favorite served slightly unconventionally in a Midwestern state? If there's anything that



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Gotham has done consistently over the course of its existence, it's work really hard to bring as much East Coast authenticity to Madison as possible.

Served on a toasted sesame bagel (my choice), the soft-shell crab sandwich is a formidable bite. Tall and chewy, it's not something to eat in your Sunday best—a bit of tomato will undoubtedly fly your way. The flavor is a much stronger seafood sensation than, say, had-dock or imitation crab. The meat is sweet with a little funky edge to it, and the batter-frying adds a hint of bitterness. These flavors are all represented in the accoutrements: sweet tomato and lettuce, rich tartar sauce, and a pinch of bitter horseradish.

The main difficulty in eating this sandwich (no, not the fact that it's a whole animal in there; don't look if you think it'll bother you) is the texture. First, the bread. Bagels, when done right, should fight you a little when you eat them. Gotham has very good bagels, and when they're toasted, they fight even more. This is great when the filling is nice, greasy Cuban pork or a creamy chicken salad, but when you're working against a crispy piece of fried seafood, you can come away with more than a little TMJ.

Second, a note to soft-shell purists. I'll have to double-check the next time I'm visiting, but it's possible that Gotham's soft-shells are not exactly what Jack Nicholson would have been ordering in *As Good As It Gets*. There's a little bit of a toughness to the outside of the crab, similar to nori (the dry incarnation of the seaweed wrap that goes into your sushi roll). I've learned that this may be what is called "papershell," when the crab is harvested near the end of its "soft" period. It's still edible and good, but might be a function of the delay in getting the crabs from the Atlantic to the isthmus.

And that's the bottom line of American openness to unusual cuisine. It's a big honking country, with a lot of regions to get to know. That's excluding the wide world of international flavor. So if Madison hasn't been overrun by durian fruit and organ meats, the rest of the world will have to excuse us. We're still catching up to Maryland. ♦

